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RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 0297
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 0799
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 0612
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 0292
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0460
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI PRIORITY 0115
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 0640
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHDC PRIORITY
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 2606
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 1985
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO BRUSSELS BE PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BISHKEK 000726

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/14/2017

TAGS: PGOV PINR PREL KDEM KG

SUBJECT: NEW KYRGYZ AMBASSADORS: OPPOSITION CRITIC TO SWITZERLAND, SEASONED VETERAN TO IRAN

REF: BISHKEK 670

BISHKEK 00000726 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: CDA Lee Litzenberger, Reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: President Bakiyev has offered the post of ambassador to Switzerland to his one-time critic, MP Melis Eshimkanov. Eshimkanov told us he had decided to accept the position in exchange for the president's promise to drop charges related to Eshimkanov's role in anti-government demonstrations in April. Eshimkanov's nomination still must be approved by parliament. In other diplomatic news, Bakiyev appointed former Speaker of Parliament Medetkan Sherimkulov as ambassador to Iran. In public, Sherimkulov has been mildly critical of the slow pace of reforms; in private, he has been sharply critical of Bakiyev. While the appointment of Sherimkulov can be seen as sending an experienced political figure to a difficult country, Eshimkanov's appointment appears to be an attempt to send a sharp critic into diplomatic "exile." END SUMMARY.

FROM OPPOSITION MP TO LOYAL DIPLOMAT

¶2. (C) Member of Parliament Melis Eshimkanov has been an outspoken critic of President Bakiyev. He was one of the main backers of the anti-government protest in November 2006, and he participated in the United Front-sponsored hunger strike and protest in April 2007. His Kyrgyz-language newspaper, Agym, which he recently sold under pressure, had been sharply critical of Bakiyev. It was a surprise, therefore, when Bakiyev nominated Eshimkanov to be the Kyrgyz ambassador to Switzerland.

¶13. (C) In a meeting with the Ambassador on June 1, Eshimkanov said he had decided to accept the position in exchange for the president's promise to drop all charges and fines pressed against him and his relatives following the April demonstrations. He claimed that he had been under pressure from the government, saying that all of his relatives had been sacked from government positions. In addition, he feared for his own safety and that of his family -- and Geneva would be a safer place. (Note: Eshimkanov had a pistol harnessed to his side throughout the meeting, and he remarked that this was "no way to live." End note.) While parliament's international relations committee has approved the nomination, Eshimkanov still awaits full parliamentary approval and the president's final authorization. Eshimkanov was confident, however, that he would be able to begin his new life in Switzerland by the end of July.

¶14. (C) In the meeting, the ever-changeable Eshimkanov appeared already to have become a member of the president's team. Though there was still an opposition United Front flag on his desk, Eshimkanov was sharply critical of United Front leader Felix Kulov. He said Kulov's anti-Bakiyev, anti-government rhetoric was becoming increasingly aggressive, and called Kulov's recent suggestion to create a confederation with Russia a "stupid" idea. Eshimkanov said that despite Kulov's tactics, Bakiyev was trying to find common ground with opposition forces and push the reform agenda forward. He also hinted at a growing rapport with the president, saying that Bakiyev had blessed Eshimkanov's initiative to defend the Manas Airbase (reftel).

FORMER SPEAKER HEADED TO IRAN

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¶15. (C) On June 8, Bakiyev formally appointed former Speaker of Parliament Medetkan Sherimkulov as the new ambassador to Iran, replacing Avazbek Atakhanov. Sherimkulov, who had been nominated for the post back in April, is expected to take up his duties soon. A seasoned political figure, Sherimkulov served as ambassador to Turkey from 1998-2002, and since then he has been a professor of political science at the National University. Sherimkulov has occasionally been critical of the Bakiyev administration's slow movement on constitutional and economic reforms, although he publicly supported the government's use of force to disperse the April demonstrations. Privately, however, Sherimkulov has referred to Bakiyev as an inexperienced, uncouth opportunist who has done little to move the country in the right direction.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) A posting to Switzerland is one way to silence a critic. The volatile Eshimkanov had been one of the most outspoken members of the opposition, but he appears now to be on the president's team -- or at least willing to play along in return for ending government pressure on him and his family. Sherimkulov's appointment, on the other hand, does appear to be a case of sending an experienced hand to a difficult post.

LITZENBERGER